

Challenger Deep by Neal Shusterman (p26-27)

Skills Focus: parallel structure, mood

Mystery Ashtray

There is no one at school who wishes me harm.

I tell myself this each morning after checking the news for Chinese earthquakes. I tell myself as I hurry between classes. I tell myself on the occasions that I pass the kid who wants to kill me, and yet doesn't seem to know I exist.

"You're overreacting," my father had said. Which might be true -- but that implies there was something to actually react to. In better moments I want to beat the crap out of myself for being so stupid as to think the kid had it in for me. So what does it say about me if beating the crap out of myself is one of my better moments?

"You need to be more centered," my mother would say. She's all into meditation and raw vegan food, I suppose as a way to cope with how much she hates cleaning meat out of people's teeth for a living.

Centering, however is easier said than done. This I learned from a ceramics class I once took. The teacher made throwing a pot look easy, but the thing is, it takes lots of precision and skill. You slam the ball of clay down in the absolute center of the pottery wheel, and with steady hands you push your thumb into the middle of it, spreading it wider a fraction of an inch at a time. But every single time I tried to do it, I only got so far before my pot warped out of balance, and every attempt to fix it just made it worse, until the lip shredded, the sides collapsed, and I was left with what the teacher called "a mystery ashtray," which got hurled back into the clay bucket.

So what happens when your universe begins to get off balance, and you don't have any experience with bringing it back to center? All you can do is fight a losing battle, waiting for those walls to collapse, and your life to become one huge mystery ashtray.

Craft study: The writer has the narrator repeat the words "I tell myself..." three times as the beginning of this passage. Explain how this repetition adds to the meaning.

Response: Think about a time when you felt your universe got off balance. Describe it by using a unique metaphor like the pottery-making one the narrator does here.

Challenger Deep by Neal Shusterman (p48-49)

Skills Focus: allusion

Some of my Friends Are Cirque-ish

I sit with my friends for lunch. And yet I don't. That is to say, I'm among them, but I don't feel *with* them. Used to be I could easily fit in with whatever friends I was hanging out with. Some people need a clique to make them feel safe. They have this little protective bubble of friend that they rarely venture away from. I was never like that. I could always flow freely from table to table, group to group. The athletes, the brainiacs, the hipsters, the band kids, the skaters. I was always well liked and well accepted by all, and I always managed to fit in like a chameleon. How strange, then, that now I find myself in a clique of one, even when I'm with a group.

My friends scarf down their lunches, and laugh about something I didn't hear. It's not like I'm intentionally zoning out, but somehow I can't land myself in the conversation. Their laughter feels so far away it's as if there's cotton in my ears. It's been happening more and more. It's like they're not even talking English -- they're speaking that weird fake language the clowns speak in Cirque du Soleil. My friends are all conversing in Cirque-ish. Usually I'll play along. I'll join in the laughter so I can stay camouflaged and appear to be in step with those around me. But today I'm not in the mood to pretend. My buddy Taylor, who is slightly more observant than the others, notices my absence, and raps me gently on the arm.

"Hey, earth to Caden Bosh - where are you, man?"

"In orbit around Uranus," I tell him, which makes everyone laugh, and it starts a whole round of rude puns that all sound Cirque-ish, because I've already checked out again.

Craft study: Explain the effect of the allusion to the meaning of the passage.

Response: Describe a time when you have felt alone even when you were with a group of people. Use an allusion somewhere in your description.